Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at
http://download.archiveofourown.org/works/4678697.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Super Smash Brothers, Xenoblade Chronicles, Fire Emblem: Kakusei | Fire Emblem: Awakening
Relationship:	Male My Unit/Shulk | Male Avatar/Shulk
Character:	Male My Unit | Avatar, Shulk
Additional Tags:	sunset, Battle Scenes, Kidnapping, Torture, Other Additional Tags to Be Added, Nightmares, Blood Drinking, Mind Control
Stats:	Published: 2015-08-29 Updated: 2015-09-05 Chapters: 5/6 Words: 19052

Desert Storm

by Ryeaugla

Summary

Robin wants to show Shulk the world he calls home, but Shulk learns the hard way about what makes Plegia so different from Ylisse.

The Brewing

Chapter Summary

A promise between lovers is made, but disaster causes that promise to go unfulfilled. The darkness separates the young heroes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shulk was largely a man of routine. A couple months had gone by since the beginning of the fourth Super Smash Bros. Tournament, and by this time, anybody remotely familiar with the flaxen haired Homs had become accustomed to which places were his usual jaunts. He was usually found in one of three main places: his bedroom (which he shared with his boyfriend Robin), a room in the mansion's garage that essentially had become the blond's weapons laboratory, or the establishment's gigantic library full of books from dozens of different worlds. Whenever he wasn't in one of these places, it was likely because he was eating in the grand hall, but considering the teen's small appetite, the chance he was there was rather slim.

And yet, the silver haired tactician had looked in all of these places to no avail. It was getting pretty late and the sun was about to set, so it worried Robin that there had been absolutely no sign of the Heir to the Monado lately. He had asked people in every room he visited during his search, but not one of them seemed to know where the missing swordsman was. Anxiousness started to build in the tactician's stomach as he searched around frantically, hoping that something terrible hadn't befallen his boyfriend.

No, pull yourself together, Robin! The ivory haired male told himself as he smacked the palms of his hands against his forehead, as if trying to beat the thoughts out of his head that something bad happened. *Shulk has the Monado - if anything bad were to happen to him, he'd see it before hand and prevent it from happening.* That self-reassurance was the only thing at this point that kept the male sane as he continued his search, now looking in every place imaginable for some sign of his younger friend.

He had no idea where the thought came from to check it out, but Robin quickly plodded toward the top of the building, perhaps hoping that looking out from the roof might give him a bird's eye view. Perhaps he could locate some kind of hint as to where Shulk could be all the way up there. Of course, it was a bit of a silly thought, as that would assume that Shulk would even be outside, but still he climbed to the topmost floor. Upon opening up the door to the balcony, Robin's heart skipped a beat. Sitting behind the barricade that prevented individuals from falling off was a swordsman clad in magenta, brown, and gray, legs swinging from the edge of the roof. He was leaning against one of the railings, arms folded and staring off at... Robin had no idea what, honestly. A ruby red sword lay at a strange angle across its chosen wielder's back, propped into that position by the ground. It was a large weapon, and thus it had to hang at an angle in order to remain attached. After the initial shock of realizing who was sitting there before him, Robin called out the other's name.

"Shulk!" He yelled, cupping his hands around his mouth to amplify his voice. It was a bit of a habit that he wasn't exactly trying to break, but it had succeeded in getting the attention of the Heir to the Monado, who quickly whirled his torso around in order to face the tactician. The blond was

oblivious to the slight scraping that the Monado had made as he turned, smiling up at the other Smasher behind him.

"Oh, Robin, you're just in time." Shulk announced, tapping the ground next to him three times as if to invite him over. After the silver haired male silently gave his boyfriend a puzzled look, Shulk couldn't help but chuckle before continuing. "I came up here in order to watch the sun go down. Come on, sit next to me so we can talk." Robin shrugged slightly, figuring he might as well do what the swordsman wanted and walked up over to the railing and sat down. Long purple sleeves suitable for somebody with at least twice as much muscle mass as the tactician reached up and folded together as he reclined over the barricade much like how Shulk did. A second later, Robin felt strawlike hair brush against his ear as Shulk rested his head next to his boyfriend's, sighing contentedly. "The sunset here is so beautiful..." The blond said, voice sounding almost singsong in its lightness. "It's really nothing like anything we have back on Bionis..."

"...You don't have sunsets back on Bionis?" Robin asked, turning his head slightly to look at Shulk. He knew that the boy laying on his shoulder right now wasn't a human like him, but a member of a humanoid alien species known as 'Homs'. Robin was also aware that the world Shulk came from, known as Bionis, was very unlike the world that the ivory haired male called home, as it was made up of the body of a dead titan that was about the size of an entire continent. But to think that Shulk had rarely ever seen a sunset much like the one they were sitting in front of now practically blew the tactician's mind. He needed to hear more about this.

Chuckling slightly, Shulk decided to humor the male with an explanation. "I don't exactly have sunsets like this at least." The flaxen haired seer readjusted his head, leaning back on his own gray-sweatered arms due to the fact that his neck was starting to get tired. "Usually the sun on Bionis just sort of... blinks out of existence after a certain time of day, only to reappear when daytime returns. It doesn't exactly dip below the horizon line like it's doing here. Quite the odd behaviour to you, I'm sure. It's a sight that I really wish Fiora was around to see..." Shulk's mood took a turn for the worse whenever he mentioned Fiora, who Robin had gathered as being a friend of the blond's who had died in a Mechon attack not long before the seer had been chosen to participate in the tournament here.

Wanting to take Shulk's mind off of his misery, Robin turned his head and nodded slightly, deciding it was time to do something he wanted to do for a long time. The two of them had been dating for some time now, but neither had visited the other's world yet. Considering Bionis was a bit of a war zone right now due to the threat of the Mechon, that option was off limits to everybody who wasn't from the world in question. Robin wasn't going to be able to see Shulk's supposedly beautiful home until the Heir to the Monado had dealt with the problems back home. Ylisse, on the other hand, was perfectly safe, as the threat of Grima had been eliminated prior to the tournament's start. Robin slowly looked over the younger male, noticing that he looked quite downtrodden. Gods, Shulk's sadness just pulled at every heartstring in the tactician's chest. He just wanted to do whatever it took to get the seer's sweet smile to appear once again. And that was what prompted the next action.

"Shulk..." He said slowly, prompting the teenager in question to redirect his cerulean eyes into the chocolate orbs of the tactician. "Would you like to see what sunsets are like back home for me? It's a bit different in Ylisse than it is here, though it's certainly nothing like what you described a Bionis sunset to be like." The rings of Ether in Shulk's eyes shimmered knowingly as he listened to the question, nodding briskly after a few seconds.

"...Yes, I would love to see what Ylisse is like! I would love to compare your world with its relatively flat continents to Bionis!" The Homs' arms quickly clamped around Robin's shoulders, very nearly tackling him sideways. It was taking much of the tactician's strength to push back against the taller boy. He found it rather hard to believe that at one point, the young man who was

very nearly pinning him to the ground with nothing but his weight used to be a very frail and sickly boy. That's what Shulk had said about himself, at least. Still, Robin couldn't help but reach up and place his arms around his boyfriend, holding onto him gently as they continued to embrace.

"In that case, I'll ask Master Hand for some time off from the tournament for both of us so you can check out my home." The ivory haired male said gently, one arm reaching up and starting to run through the strawlike locks that his boyfriend possessed. They stayed like that for a little while before Shulk turned his head in the direction of the sun, which had very nearly disappeared below the horizon line by this time. The dusk sky was bright red and the air was still quite warm even though it was going to be dark very shortly. The two embraced until the sun completely disappeared, agreeing that it was about time for them to head back indoors. People were probably looking for them by this point, after all.

Several days later, Robin and Shulk had gotten the permission to head out to the world that the former called home under the pretense that the Homs would be led around to see what the world was like, as it was far different from Bionis. Even though it was a time of peace, Shulk couldn't help but bring his trusted weapon along with him, just in case things happened to go sour. He sincerely hoped that he wasn't going to need it, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Once the portal had dropped the two off, Robin took a look around the area in order to figure out exactly where they had been dropped off. Within a couple of minutes of pacing around for some kind of landmark, the tactician finally got his bearings, figuring out that the two of them had been deposited somewhere near the border between Ylisse and Plegia. Judging by the look on Robin's face, this wasn't where they were supposed to end up. He looked extremely perplexed, scratching the top of his head as he usually did whenever he was trying to think. Curious, Shulk voiced the question that had came to his mind, unintentionally tilting his head slightly as he inquired.

"...Just where were we supposed to end up, Robin?" He asked, clasping his hands together. The sound of the Homs' voice seemed to be enough to snap Robin out of his deep thoughts, giving a reassuring smile to the younger male.

"We were supposed to end up right in the middle of Ylisstol, the capital of Ylisse. Chrom was supposed to greet us as we arrived, but clearly he's nowhere to be seen here..." After a moment, Robin looked extremely uncomfortable, as if realization had just hit him hard. "...Oh gods..." He muttered. "We're probably hours away from Ylisstol and Chrom's probably just waiting in front of where we were supposed to appear, tapping his foot impatiently... I had told him that we'd be around at approximately 17:00 so that we'd have time to see Ylisse for a little bit before sunset. So much for that..." Robin gave a great sigh, hanging his head in frustration. "By the time we get to Ylisstol from here, it'd probably be the middle of the night."

"...So, what do you suppose we do?" Shulk asked, a little concerned. Seeing as he wasn't from this world, he had every reason to be nervous if he had absolutely no idea where he was and Robin was only a little more sure. Robin seemed to be acutely aware that Shulk was on edge, walking over and clasping his partly gloved hands around the seer's own bare palms. Trying to make things a little less tense for the Monado wielder, he reached up and took a quick kiss from the mouth of his younger lover, rolling up onto the balls of his feet to reach, considering Shulk was a few inches taller than the tactician.

"We head to Plegia's capital." He said tactfully. "It's closer to our current location than Ylisstol is and we'll get there before night falls. From there, I should be able to write a letter and send it out to Chrom telling him that we'll be spending the night there and we'll be setting out for Ylisse again in the morning. Just follow my lead and we'll be able to cross the Plegian desert with little difficulty." Shulk nodded, trusting completely in Robin. He knew a lot more about this place, after all. And

with their plan decided, Robin let go of Shulk's hands and started trudging across the savanna. The seer stayed close behind, not wanting to let Robin out of his sights. Sure, the area around them was almost completely flat with perhaps a large rock or two every so often, but he still didn't want to risk getting separated with no chance of being found again. The sun was fairly low in the sky, so the burning sands weren't nearly as bad as they might have been several hours earlier.

Neither of the two young men realized it, but they weren't alone out here in the supposed middle of nowhere. People were scattered about out of plain view, hiding as quietly as they could to glean as much information as they could in regards to the two that had just appeared before them. Some might have actually been spotted if Robin had bothered to search a little harder than he had in his survey to determine where he and Shulk had ended up. However, that wasn't the case. Signals were shared between the vagabonds, silently communicating their next plan of action.

They had all seen it, the undeniable proof of love between the tactician and the strange boy with a foreign accent and even more foreign looking clothing. It was the former that they had been initially sent to capture, but something about the other drew them in. Judging by the fact that the highwaymen had never seen clothes even notably similar to the lad's as well as the questions that he had asked, they knew he wasn't from around these parts. Considering they all knew how much the boy and the tactician were in love, perhaps it would be worth their time to show the young man just what he was getting into by becoming romantically involved with a Plegian.

Quickly and quietly, the group slinked forward, getting into a position to surround their targets, all while trying to keep themselves still hidden. Robin still failed to see any of the danger, and neither did Shulk, but he didn't need to actually physically see it, as it wasn't long later before he stopped in his tracks, gasping slightly as his eyes started glowing bright blue.

"I-I'm... seeing something!" He announced, which immediately caused Robin to stop and whirl around. The tactician quickly strode back to where Shulk was standing, taking both of his hands with a look of concern on his face.

"...What is it, Shulk?! What do you see?!" The ivory haired male asked, not even trying to hide the look of apprehension on his face. Robin knew that whenever Shulk's eyes started glowing, it meant that he was seeing a glimpse of the future, and more than likely, it was bad news. The seer shook his head slowly, his brow furrowing in frustration and confusion.

"I... don't actually see much... Give me a second to analyse..." The teenager fretted. "I see myself... And you faintly... But then we're completely surrounded in blackness. Yet there's something clearly there, as you and I have our weapons out. I can't see what it is... We're trying to fight... something." He then gasped, eyes widening even more despite the fact that they were already completely open to let him actually see the future play out before him. "...Whatever it was, it ended up knocking you down... and then me too! And then... I see myself being carried away into the darkness..." After finishing that explanation, the blue glow disappeared from the clairvoyant's eyes, and he could finally see the fear on the smaller male's face.

"That darkness... What could it possibly be?" The elder urged. "And what do you mean you could barely see me? Shulk, this is not good... I'm very concerned about your vision." Had Shulk just seen himself, he probably would have suspected an actual darkness attacking, but the fact that there was a faint glow highlighting Robin's body gave the Homs the most probable answer to what he had seen.

"...It's Ether." He explained succinctly. "Rather, a lack thereof. The Monado's visions are created when the weapon senses the flow of Ether and predicts where particles will be in the future. It's super useful on Bionis because everything is made of Ether, and Master Hand probably made some kind of adjustment to my visions to allow them to happen in the tournament grounds properly, but no such adjustment exists out here on your own world. I couldn't see anything

because whatever it was that attacked us didn't have any Ether in its body... or perhaps bodies." Knowing that his visions had been all but rendered useless out here in Robin's world just because there wasn't any Ether around made the poor Homs feel extremely vulnerable. Even if he technically still did have his foresight, it was impaired in such a way that knowing what was going to happen didn't really mean much.

As if to make things worse, the Plegian vagabonds finally came out of hiding, charging with axes and dark tomes at the ready while screaming intimidatingly at the two men. Robin very quickly pulled a Levin Sword and an Arcfire tome out of his robes while Shulk took the Monado off his back and flipped it open to let its Ether beam appear between its sides, the two swordsmen standing back to back as the attackers came at them. Several of the barbarians were quickly dealt with, their bulky weapons no match for the sleek swords that the two Smashers wielded.

However, it quickly became apparent that the enemies had far many more of their kind, and that advantage would soon make things hard for Shulk and Robin. Several axes chopped at each young man at the same time, making it extremely hard to not only defend, but attempt to attack in return. That coupled with the fact that several Dark Mages were off to the sides preparing spells meant this was certainly a losing battle. Once those spells had been finished, dark magic reached up from nowhere, sapping away the energy of their victims as they yelled out in agony.

Robin was the first to fall, tome and sword scattering across the sand in the wake of his defeat. Shulk realized now that this was the exact scene that the Monado was trying to warn him about but failed to do so properly thanks to the lack of Ether allowing him to see the whole situation. It was a moment later when the Heir to the Monado also fell, dropping his legendary weapon. After being let go by its wielder, the ruby sword quickly snapped shut once again. Realizing they were victorious, a signal was made for a Wyvern Rider who was flying overhead to come down. The draconic creature that was being rode upon hovered above the ground, allowing for one of the barbarians to throw the unconscious blond over onto its back. A Dark Mage had come over and confiscated the Arcfire tome and Levin Sword, figuring that they could be useful for their troops. However, when he went to pick up the Monado as well, curiosity quickly took over. The Plegian wanted to figure out how it worked, but couldn't seem to figure it out for a moment. Upon flicking a switch on the underside of the weapon, though, he was quickly electrocuted, as he was not the weapon's chosen wielder. Giving up, he just dropped the red sword, figuring there was no need to bring it along if it wasn't capable of being used for anything more than painful shock.

The troops hurried off with their loot while the Wyvern Rider sped away with the captive in tow. All that was left there out on the sand was a disarmed Robin and the Monado.

When Shulk finally woke up, he felt immensely weak. Groaning slightly, he rolled over a little to try to get up, finding that his hands were firmly bound together in front of him. Whatever struggling he attempted to do failed, as the binding was strung in such a way that it nearly cut off circulation to his hands. There was still hope to get out of this situation, however. Both of the hands reached back over his right shoulder in anticipation of grabbing the weapon that usually sat there. However, that hope quickly vanished as the blond realized that there was no Monado on his back. Trying to piece everything together in his mind, it quickly became clear as to why he was unarmed, causing the young man to gasp slightly. He remembered everything - the vision he'd had, the fight not long later, and then the fact that he and Robin had lost the fight... Shulk realized he had dropped the Monado much like how Robin's weaponry had fallen out of his hands after his defeat just prior.

Seeing as he was completely unarmed and unable to get the painful bindings off his hands, the seer knew that he was in big trouble. Two individuals in long purple cloaks seemed to be headed in his direction as well, apparently having noticed that the captive had awakened. It was

impossible to see their faces as the hoods attached to the cloaks they wore covered them up. The Homs tried to roll away - or at the very least to the furthermost wall of the cell he was being held in, but upon doing so, he came to realize that there was a purple cloak draped over him as well that hit him in the face when he shied away. Shulk hadn't noticed prior, but the bright magenta vest he usually wore had been removed, replaced with a dark purple cloak that hung over his tied up hands. The rest of his typical gray and brown outfit seemed to be intact, though. Odd, why had his kidnappers went through the trouble of taking his vest off and not any of the rest of his clothes?

"You there." One of the two hooded individuals said with a deep voice, standing at the bars of the cell. "It's time for your ceremony. Rise to your feet or else you will be forced to do so." Of course, Shulk had no intention of obeying these freaks who had captured him, and thus he spat insults back at them.

"...I'd rather do a nosedive off the Bionis' Head than follow any of your orders, you bloody bastards!" He hissed. "I'm going to make you wish you hadn't done this to me!" There didn't seem to be any physical reaction to the defiance, however. The two just nodded to one another before one made a quick flicking motion with his wrist. A second later, there was an immense pain that jolted throughout the Homs' entire body. As he screamed out in agony, Shulk realized that he had been forced to his feet by whatever terrible magic he was being subjected to. Finally, the pain disappeared as he just stood there at the far wall. As much as the teenager wanted to fall down onto his face again, he wasn't so stupid as to do such a thing, knowing that he'd be forced to his feet once again in an equally painful way. Therefore, he just stood there, trying to regain his breath.

"Step forward." The other cloaked individual said, his voice even deeper than his companion's, opening the cell door so that the captive could come out. Realizing that refusal would mean being dragged out by painful magic, Shulk complied, lumbering out between the two. He hadn't realized it until he was standing right next to them, but the two men (he assumed they were men at least by their voices) were quite a bit taller than he was. Just then, a long, spindly hand reached out and grabbed the hood from behind the seer's neck, forcibly pulling it up over his head. Shulk had very nearly gotten whiplash from the surprisingly strong move, but now there was thick purple fabric half covering his eyes.

"You must keep your hood up at all times unless told otherwise." The first man said. "Now you're ready for your induction... We will bring you to where you need to be for the ceremony." Induction... Something about the whole situation told the Homs that it wasn't going to be a very pleasant ceremony - at least for him. It was enough for figurative butterflies to start trying to escape from his stomach, leaving him feeling quite sick.

Chapter End Notes

TBC with 4214 words. Couple things to note here.

1. The idea for this fic came from reading somewhere that Plegians are inducted into the Grimleal cult from birth, even if many of them only do so in name only. In other words, Rye is a sadist who likes to see her favorite characters get hurt, haha. Also even though Grima has been vanquished by the time the events of this story take place (though not permanently, as this fic follows the Chrom ending of Awakening), the Grimleal cult still exists. It's going to take a long time for the most devoted members of the cult to give up their beliefs, after all.

2. Whereas Robin and the other Awakening characters have been taken from the Chrom ending of the game, Shulk has been taken from the middle of Xenoblade Chronicles. All of the events taking place on the first trip to Prison Island or later have not yet occurred to him. This is to explain how Shulk has the Monado I in the Smash setting and why he says what he does about Fiora.

3. Whenever I write dialogue for Shulk, I use British spellings of words to reflect his British accent. Seeing as I'm American, however, the rest of the story - including Robin's and everybody else's dialogue - is spelled with American spellings. It's not so obvious in this chapter (as Shulk only says two things in this chapter that use an alternative spelling), but in later chapters it might be a bit more apparent.

The Advent

Chapter Summary

> The initiation begins as Shulk is dragged into a dark room for the sake of the ceremony, not knowing just what kind of fate awaits him yet. Meanwhile, Robin makes his way to Plegia's capital and deals with a few more ruffians along the way.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chocolate brown eyes belonging to the tactician magician flickered open slowly, half hazy from exhaustion at first. Robin's sweat-covered head felt like it was going to explode, frankly. The sun was near the horizon line at this point, coating the entire area with a red hue. This only served to further highlight the most vibrant red object in the area where the mage had awakened, one which made his heart belly-flop into the deepest recesses of his abdomen. The Monado sat next to him, looking bright scarlet in the setting sun. Its chosen wielder was nowhere to be seen. Robin remembered everything that happened upon seeing the beautiful ruby sword sitting beside him. Cautiously, the ivory haired mage reached out, gingerly resting a hand on the Sword of the Bionis' hilt. Shulk had told him that the Monado was a very fickle weapon, either electrocuting those unworthy of wielding it or bucking like an untamed mare. In its deactivated state, however, neither of these happened. The only reason Robin ended up pulling his hand away was because the sword was extremely hot to the touch, having sat out in the open sun for a long time and conducted heat the whole time.

A moment later, Robin reached out again, bringing the weapon close to his body by dragging it close with his gloves. The sun had started to dip below the horizon now, and the ivory haired tactician became extremely sad when he remembered the whole reason why he had bothered to bring Shulk to his world in the first place. He wanted the Homs to see what sunsets were like in Ylisse. And yet, it was sundown now, but he was alone. All that remained of his beloved was his beautiful sword. The sweet, lithe teenager that it belonged to was nowhere to be found. The weapon was still very hot to the touch, but it gave Robin an immense sense of comfort just hugging the Monado as he watched the sun go down. He held it close to his chest, desperately holding on as if he was giving Shulk himself a hug. Tears involuntarily ran down the tactician's cheeks as he thought about how he had failed to protect the younger Smasher.

He really did ruin everything by being too weak... He was too afraid of dying to hurry forward before Chrom did to smite the Fell Dragon Grima back then, and he was too weak to protect somebody he loved with his entire heart now. What good was he as a person if he couldn't be relied upon for the most important things?

No, there was still time. It wasn't too late.

After moping about during the entire time the sun vanished below the horizon, Robin figured that the least he could do for Shulk would be to look for him. There was no sign of blood on the sand, after all. Besides, the ivory haired male was sure that Shulk was alive, between the vision the blond seer had prior to their ambush as well as utmost faith in the young man's strength. Robin looked down at the weapon he was cradling in his arms. Shulk needed his sword back. Wherever he was, the young Homs was unarmed and likely waiting for his white haired hero to swoop in

and rescue him.

Not wanting to drag the admittedly quite heavy sword throughout the entirety of Plegia, Robin tried seeing what he could do to attach the Monado to his back. The mage hypothesized that it had to be some kind of magic that Shulk used to keep the weapon attached to his outfit when it wasn't being swung around, as the Homs didn't wear a sheath over his vest and sweater. Of course, Robin didn't have any idea what that magic could be, and thus he was forced to make a makeshift sheath out of some of the fabric on his person. It wasn't the most secure hold, but it would at the very least keep the Monado from falling off his back and forcing Robin to lug it along behind him. Maybe once he got to Plegia's capital he could get some more fabric to keep it attached to his person better while simultaneously maintaining his typical tactician look.

Either way, Robin's goal right now was to reach the capital. Perhaps there he would be able to find out something about where Shulk might have disappeared to. A silent prayer was given to the gods as he traversed through the night in hopes that nothing bad would happen to the Heir to the Monado before he could be found and rescued.

Shulk made sure to keep his paces steady enough so that he stayed between the two men who were leading him to the initiation ceremony. Seeing as the hood half covering his face was preventing him from seeing straight ahead, he only managed to keep up and follow them through the various twists and turns of whatever facility he was being kept prisoner within because his eyes tracked the men's feet. Not only that, but his sight was fuzzy for some reason, but not enough so that he couldn't make out the dark boots plodding across the floor. Just how much longer would it take before they would get to their destination?

The moment that the blond wondered that, however, the three stopped walking. There was a tense moment of silence in the room now as the smell of burning candles accosted the teenager's nostrils. How many candles were actually lit in this room to make the smell so strong? He wanted to lift his head up in order to peek out from beneath the hood and take a better look around, but the silence was broken just then.

"*Kneel, child.*" One of the cloaked men standing next to Shulk demanded, instantly sending a chill up his spine. Afraid that he'd have whatever painful magic that was used to force him to his feet earlier cast upon him again if he refused, the seer quickly complied, almost falling onto his shins. An unintended result of this quick drop, however, was the fabric of the hood he was wearing falling back onto his shoulders. Shulk gasped quietly as he realized that had happened, but he was too shocked by what he could now see before him to pull the hood back up over his face. Instead, he just stared at the plethora of candles burning in the distance as well as about a dozen pairs of red eyes belonging to kneeling figures glaring into his own. He was all but paralyzed by the fearsome gazes piercing into his soul. There was a thick, dark smog that covered up a lot of the room, but he could tell in spite of his rather fuzzy eyesight that past it , there was a mural dotting the walls over their heads. The room was completely devoid of any other kind of distinguishing feature past that.

Just then, a hand tightly grasped the top of the Homs' head, painfully squeezing his skull. He wanted to yell out in pain, but the deep voice that followed scared him out of doing so.

"I told you to keep your hood up at all times unless told to put it down, child." The voice rang in Shulk's ears for several seconds afterward. After he finished speaking, the young man's voice timidly piped up.

"I-I'm sorry... It's just I..." Once again the booming voice echoed, cutting Shulk off before he could finish the sentence.

"**Do not speak unless asked to do so.**" That was enough to get the blond swordsman to shut up immediately, squeaking quietly under his breath after hearing the angry demand. After that, the hand stopped squeezing Shulk's head and forced the dark colored hood back over the top half of his face. Yet again his neck was lurched forward from the act. If this kept up, the seer was going to have a broken neck by the time he got out of here... At least, that was assuming he would get out of here.

No, this wasn't the time to be pessimistic. There was still hope. Robin had to be on his way here to put a stop to whatever these intimidating freaks had in mind for him. Just the thought that sometime in the near future, a young man with hair as pure as newly fallen snow, eyes like the sweetest melted chocolate, and a rich violet robe embroidered in gold would come barging in and whisk the Homs away from this dreadful place. But until then, he had to deal with whatever it was these freaks wanted.

A hand gently rested atop Shulk's head at this time, not squeezing it unlike a moment prior. The owner of the voice spoke up just then, likely addressing the figures with red eyes that sat before him. "My fellow Plegians." He stated in a calm voice. "We have gathered here today to induct this child into our ranks as one of our brethren. He has shown romantic interest in one of our own, and thus he shall become a Grimleal like us." Just hearing what the man had calmly said tied more figurative knots in Shulk's stomach than any of the threats he had been given prior. Was it really true that the reason he was sitting before them right now was because he was in love with Robin? And that name 'Grimleal'... That was the name of the cult that tried to revive the evil dragon that had nearly destroyed the land of Ylisse! There was no way that Robin was one of them, especially considering that the tactician had been the vessel for Grima! He wanted no part of that fate!

You're wrong! He wanted to shout out. *Robin's not a Grimleal! He's the tactician of Ylisse! He would never approve of this!* And yet, something was holding him back, preventing him from screaming out the truth to these religious nuts. It wasn't any kind of spell that the Grimleal had put upon him, though. Fear of getting hurt by their magic wasn't restricting him either. And yet, he couldn't find the strength to say it. He continued to kneel there silently with a hand on his head, his wrists having gone completely numb by this point. Of course, what the Homs hadn't realized yet was that there was another, more dire reason as to why his skin was starting to turn deathly pale...

Darkness had creeped over Plegia by the time Robin got to the capital of the desert continent. It was very quiet at this time, but the tactician had reason to believe that there were all kinds of undesirable individuals lurking about, waiting to prey on an unsuspecting victim. Since he had begun his trek through the desert, the ivory haired male had found out that his tome and sword had been stolen after the attack back in the desert. Literally the only weapon on his person was the Monado tied awkwardly to his back. For a genius tactician, he hadn't exactly come up with a backup plan in case his weaponry were to be stolen from right out from underneath his nose. Granted, Robin hadn't thought that would be a problem to begin with, considering he and Shulk were originally supposed to end up safely in the middle of Ylisstol to meet with Chrom.

...Chrom! Whoops. The tactician had very nearly forgotten about the Exalt of Ylisse in his harrowing trip through the desert. Not a very wise thing to do, considering the silver haired male was one of Chrom's most trusted confidants. The first thing he would do once he got settled at an inn for the night would be to write up a letter and call some kind of messenger bird to bring it to Ylisse come morning. The Exalt needed to know that Robin wasn't going to be around until he found Shulk again, alive or dead.

Just then, there was a slight scratching noise that brought the mage out of his thoughts. As expected, there were thieves and other undesirables running around. And apparently walking around the capital at night with a beautiful red sword attached to your back was some kind of

calling card for thieves to attack. Chuckling confidently, Robin started untying the weapon haphazardly attached to his robe.

"You know, if you wanted to sneak up on me, actually sneaking would be wise." By the time he finished that sentence, the Monado had fallen from its makeshift sheath into his right hand, allowing him to swing it freely in order to punctuate his gesticulation while the mage continued to taunt. "I know you're there. Let me guess, it's my weapon you're after, right? Think it'll fetch a pretty penny or something because of how beautiful it is with its metallic red body and glowing blue lines? Unfortunately for you, I need this sword myself. A friend of mine is going to need it back."

"In that case, we'll deliver it to yer friend ourselves. Heheheh..." A burly looking man with an axe stepped out of the shadows, smiling darkly at Robin. Several other figures stepped out into the moonlight, leering hungrily at their intended victim. The ivory haired male's stomach lurched a little afterward, though it wasn't in response to the fact that he was right about the thief trying to come after him. No, it was what he said about 'delivering it to your friend ourselves' that struck a chord. Did these vagabonds perhaps know where Shulk was? Whereas Robin might have initially tried to just run away before, now he was curious to find out if that was really the case.

The problem of the matter was the fact that Robin wasn't the Heir to the Monado. If the mage flipped open the weapon to let its actual sharp blade pour out, he would end up getting electrocuted or perhaps worse. He had heard the stories from Shulk about how Dunban had irreparably damaged his right arm by swinging around the sword against the Mechon despite the fact that he wasn't its chosen wielder. Robin seriously didn't want that to happen to him. After all, if Shulk found out, he'd probably feel anger and despair simultaneously. The last thing he wanted was to deal with was Shulk refusing to look at him or unleashing an unstoppable deluge of tears from those gorgeous cerulean eyes of his ringed with Ether.

However, Robin needed to stop getting distracted. There were a bunch of rogues about to attack him. In fact, realizing that the intended victim was a bit distracted, the man who had spoken earlier leaped forward with his axe and tried to slice Robin in the stomach. The mage managed to snap out of his funk just in time to swing the Monado upward and slam the thick metal frame into the guy's hand. The rogue yelped in pain upon being hit, staggering back and shaking his hand out. And that's when an idea came to the genius tactician. He hurried forward and swung the Monado vertically downward, smacking the guy over the head while he was still jumping around due to the hand injury. He crumpled immediately, knocked out by the heavy weapon smacking against his skull. The other thieves were not happy with this, descending upon Robin all at the same time in order to get revenge for their friend who had just been knocked out.

One man swung a large axe similarly to the first attacker, another swiped with a scimitar, and the third brandished a halberd. The axe user attacked first, trying to bring his weapon down on Robin's head. However, the Monado was swung forward, completely parrying the attack. While the man's weapon was hooked onto the ruby sword, the mage swung with all his strength, launching the guy through the air several feet back and into his lancer buddy, practically squashing the smaller guy with his large bulk. And that just left the swordsman. For a while, Robin and his enemy smacked blades against one another, neither party backing down or making any mistakes that could be exploited. However, it didn't take the ivory haired man very long to realize that his opponent's tactic was to stall out and wait for his friends to pick themselves back up off the ground in order to assist. Perhaps not the lance user, but the axe wielder could certainly barrel in and make things difficult.

Figuring that he needed to mix things up a little, Robin started jogging away from the ruffian. He was the slowest runner of all the Super Smash Brothers, but he still had enough speed to get a head start on an unsuspecting opponent. "...Hey!" The man shouted before starting to give chase.

"Get back here!" But that was exactly what the ivory haired male was hoping would happen. Robin bounced clean over the half-lucid axe wielder's head at that moment into the narrow passageway behind him. Realizing there was no way to just sidestep his bulky friend, the swordsman tried to do the same.

"...OOF! GET OFF ME!" was all Robin heard in the next moment. It was enough to get him to laugh for couple seconds before hurrying back over to where the two buffoons were laying. They were barking at each other, accusing one another of letting their prize get away. It didn't look like either of them had noticed Robin sneak back up behind them, as the swordsman was completely taken aback when the tactician jabbed the tip of the deactivated blade into his buddy's stomach before using it like a vault pole to hop back over into the light of the moon. At the end of the jump, he deliberately swung his blade so it smacked into the other guy's face, causing him to fall backward from the force, knocked out.

By this time, the first guy had reawakened from being knocked out, shaking out his head and finally getting his bearings again. Noticing this, Robin hurried over and grabbed the man by his hair and placed the Monado under his chin, staring down at the man in his grasp. "You said something about returning my friend's sword." He growled. "Tell me what you know about my friend - location, condition, anything. Tell me!"

"I-I really know nothing!" He pleaded, not wanting to get beheaded. Of course, he didn't really know that Robin could neither use the weapon in its active state nor that the Monado to begin with couldn't cut people. "I just wanted to make a jab at what you were saying... A taunt, really. I wouldn't 'ave even known that sword ain't yours if you didn't say anything! I woulda taken the sword and sold it to the highest bidder... Please don't hurt me..." As much as Robin wished it wasn't true, he had no reason to suspect the man of lying. The tactician had deliberately left out a gendered pronoun from his threat in hopes of catching the guy accidentally dropping the fact that he knew Shulk was male without thinking. However, from the sound of the guy's desperation, it didn't seem like he really knew anything. Just as Robin had initially suspected, these men were just street bandits, serving nobody but themselves. He would have been better off just running away instead of trying to battle with a weapon that wasn't even his. Sighing loudly, Robin removed the Monado from the man's neck before once again slamming it over his head, knocking him out again for the second time that night.

That took care of those goons. There was just no outdoing the genius tactician of Ylisse when it came to convoluted but surprisingly effective plans like that. Still holding the Monado with one hand, Robin strode calmly away from the scene after standing up, ambling down the main road toward an inn that still had its lights on. Boy, was he going to have quite the story for Chrom to send along with the information about the whole situation now. Settling down in a hotel room after paying the keeper for the night, Robin got straight to work writing a letter for the Exalt.

> Dear Chrom,
>
> My most sincere apologies for not showing up at the assigned time when I told you Shulk and I would arrive. I'm fairly certain that somebody found out about our trip today and sabotaged our method of arrival, as we ended up fairly close to the Plegian border rather than in the middle of Ylisstol. I have yet to figure out who did it, but it's likely the saboteur is in Plegia. Not long after our botched arrival, Shulk and I were accosted by a group of brigands, likely hired by or serving for whomever it was that messed up our trip.
>
> Unfortunately, their numbers got the best of us. Despite the fact that Shulk had received a less than helpful vision about the attack prior to it happening, we just weren't able to get past the sheer size of the group. We ended up losing the battle.

Afterward, my weapons were confiscated, as was Shulk. The weapons I can replace with money I still have on my person, but I need to find Shulk before it's too late for him. I fear for his life, knowing how ruthless the Plegians can be even now after the end of the war. Perhaps even more so toward those of us allied with Ylisse out of bitterness.

I am sorry to inform you that I will not be heading to Ylisse until I've rescued Shulk. I don't know how long it will take for me to find him, but if you do not hear back from me within the next few days with a letter of my progress, perhaps you might want to look into the endeavor yourself.

My first night of looking for hints had turned up with nothing of value. I was accosted by another group of thugs who wanted to rob me. Seeing as I had been robbed earlier, I didn't exactly have my Levin Sword nor Arcfire tome, as aforementioned. The only thing I had to defend myself with was the Monado, which the first group of thieves somehow didn't think to take with them. I got to hand it to Shulk, he's got a pretty hefty, blunt weapon to defend himself with even without it being activated. I only stayed to fight under the pretense that the men knew something about Shulk's whereabouts, but it was a red herring. Still felt good to knock them out though.

Tomorrow my search will continue in full force. I hope to find Shulk quickly before something terrible happens to him. Here's hoping that I'll be able to write you a letter on my status in a few days, regardless whether or not I've found Shulk.

Sincerely,

Robin

That would do the trick. Come morning, the white haired male would call for a carrier pigeon to take the letter out to Ylisse. Hopefully the Exalt wouldn't start gathering the Shepherds again to search the countryside or something before the letter would get to him. Rolling up the note into a cylinder, Robin poured a little bit of hot wax from the candle he had been writing the letter under in order to seal it. Normally he'd use an identifying seal on the wax to make it clear to Chrom that the letter was from him, but he didn't exactly have a seal on his person right now. With those preparations for morning out of the way, the tactician finally climbed into bed to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

TBC with 3959 words. Few things of note:

1. I beta all my own stories right now, so if there are any mistakes, it's from me not double checking hard enough. I really need to find somebody who can beta read my stories and find things I gloss over...

2. Seriously, how DOES Shulk keep the Monado attached to his back? He doesn't wear a sheath, it just swings from side to side dangerously as he walks, and he just flips it off his back with a wrist flick whenever he needs to use it. Is it some kind of Ether magic? Something special that the Monado does with Shulk's Ether considering he's its chosen wielder? The Bionis only knows...

3. The Monado can only be used in its activated state without causing harm or being

"disobedient" by Shulk. However, it's been proven in the Xenoblade canon that anybody can swing around the Monado while it's deactivated, luckily for Robin. Plus, I wanted to have a little fun and let Robin get to use his boyfriend's sword for a while. ;)

The Storming

Chapter Summary

> Robin witnesses terrible imagery that preys upon his insecurities, while Shulk starts to be subjected to horrifying torture in the name of Grima.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Robin's eyes flipped open quickly, revealing to him that he was laying on the ground of a grassy plain. The area around him was tinged with a dark orange hue, almost like it was sunset again. However, upon closer inspection, the color appeared to come from an enormous, fearsome pyre that licked at the sky from a nearby city as well as several other smaller fires in the distance around the tactician. After a moment, Robin's stomach sank as he realized that the massive pillar of flames he was looking at was rising from the middle of Ylisstol. Just the thought that so many people likely died in such an inferno and he hadn't done anything about it made the mage feel sick to his stomach.

Wanting to find out more about what was going on, Robin tried to stand up, but his legs weren't cooperating with him. Looking over at them, it didn't appear at first glance that anything was wrong with his feet, but no matter how hard he tried, his legs just wouldn't move. Was there a curse cast upon him that kept him from standing? The next option was to try crawling across the ground in hopes of maybe eventually finding somebody who could help him. He reached out with both arms and started pulling himself along the earth slowly, not caring if he was going to have a ton of grass stains on his robe and pants by the time he got help.

Several shuffles across the plain later, he noticed an individual standing out in the middle of the grass, staring off at nothing in particular. They were facing away Robin, allowing him to see the Mark of Grima adorned to the back of the purple cloak they were wearing. Grimleal... Of course they would be the ones to attack Ylisstol. The tactician was deeply incensed just seeing the Grimleal standing before him, even if they weren't exactly doing anything bad right now.

"...Hey!" Robin barked, trying to get the cultist's attention. It didn't seem to work, as there was no reaction from the other. "Hey you! I'm talking to you! What are you do..." The ivory haired male would have continued to yell at the other if it weren't for a warm breeze that rolled in, throwing cinders around. More importantly, it picked the end of the Grimleal's cloak up and started waving it around, allowing Robin to take a good look at the shoes that they were wearing. As a tactician, Robin had to pay attention to every little detail, so he was quick to note the shoes when given a chance to look at them thanks to the wind. He then stopped yelling immediately once he realized what he was looking at.

"...Shulk?" He said quietly. "Shulk, no... You can't be..." At that moment, the individual in the Grimleal cloak spun around to look at Robin, and the mage could have sworn he had just been stabbed in the heart once the other finished turning. It was indeed the Heir to the Monado, staring down at the man on the ground with an empty look in his eyes. The rings in his eyes which were usually an azure color were deep red and his skin was so pale that it almost glowed in the light of the fires around them. There was an awkward moment of silence as the two stared at each other without blinking.

However, the stillness was broken as a large wall of fire burst out behind Shulk, causing Robin to gasp loudly. A moment later, a large black hand that appeared to have claws attached reached out and snatched Shulk up as a dark voice began to laugh. The blond finally gave some kind of indication that he was lucid as he tried to loudly struggle out of the grasp of whatever enormous creature had grabbed him. Robin reached out desperately, screaming Shulk's name over and over again as the dark form of a dragonlike monster formed before him while the teenager disappeared into the darkness completely. A moment later, six red eyes appeared on the large silhouette and Robin immediately knew what he was dealing with.

Grima...

You worthless fool... A voice layered with not only Robin's own, but Shulk's as well as a much deeper, almost demonic tone spoke up just then within the tactician's mind. The shadow opened up its large hand to reveal Shulk floating above its palm in a sitting position, his eyes having turned deep red and what appeared to be two more sets of glowing red eyes having appeared on his cheeks. The seer's mouth moved in unison with the voice that echoed in the mage's head. *You don't deserve happiness. You can't even protect that which you hold dear to you, after all.* It was true... Ylisstol was burning and Shulk was being controlled by the Fell Dragon here. He was utterly worthless. Broken, Robin buried his face into his arms, waiting for Grima to finish him off...

The tactician's eyes flickered open again, this time to a white tiled ceiling. Looking around, he quickly realized that he was laying on a bed inside a small room, Shulk's sword resting beside the other end of the mattress. He took a moment to take a deep breath, completely relieved that all of that terrible imagery was just a dream. And yet, there were tears rolling down his face. He was completely aware what he had seen could never actually happen, as he was sure Shulk was incompatible as a vessel for Grima, what with being a member of an alien race and all. Therefore, that certainly hadn't been a prophetic dream. So why did just that imagery playing through in his mind make him so upset? Regardless, he couldn't focus on that right now. Pulling himself out of bed, Robin threw his dark purple robe over the rest of his clothes that he had ended up sleeping in. Once he looked decent again, he picked up the Monado as well as the letter and set out for some errands. He not only needed some weapons and a better sheath for Shulk's sword, but also he needed to get a bird to carry his message out to Ylisse. Perhaps he might also even find some clue about where Shulk was, gods be willing.

The longer Shulk had to stay on his knees, the more uncomfortable he felt. That coupled with the intense chill that seemed to pervade the room was enough to make him want to curl up and wish for death. He had listened to the two men standing beside him drone on and on about the will of Grima and Grimleal culture and other things like that, but he had all but tuned them out at this point. Thanks to the fact that his hood was covering half of his face, none of the red eyed figures sitting across from him would be able to tell that his partly glazed over eyes were focused downward onto his wrists, which had fallen asleep a long time ago. He imagined Robin's gentle hands wrapping around them, trying to warm them up once again. Soon, the entire tactician appeared before the seer in his mind, softly rubbing his palms up and down. Despite the fact his hands were numb, Shulk could have sworn he felt Robin's thumbs run across his hands and it made him smile a little.

Robin was coming, Shulk knew that. He would be saved from this nightmare soon enough.

As the cloaked men beside him were not aware that the Homs' eyesight was already a bit less than perfect, one of them walked around behind Shulk and tightly wrapped a blindfold around his eyes,

causing him to gasp loudly and try to tear it off his face. The other man was quick to put a stop to this action by activating that same magic that had been used back in the cell to force Shulk to his feet, causing him to shout in agony once again. Like the first time, the magic forced him to stand, barely able to keep balance with feet that had fallen asleep from being sat upon in a weird way for so long.

"You will not need your eyes, child." The first man hissed into the seer's left ear. "Grima's six eyes will see for you and guide you. Now, walk forward." Completely unable to see anything, Shulk staggered forward, trying not to teeter into the men who were walking along ahead or any of the other figures that sat in the room. He had no idea what he was walking toward or when he had to stop, and thus he just followed orders and continued ambling on.

About a minute later, as Shulk assumed that he had gotten to about halfway across the room, he was immediately stopped by two ropes lassoing over his head from each side, pulling on his neck rather tightly. Not only was he completely surprised by the action, but he took this as a sign to stop or else the nooses would likely tighten and prevent breathing.

"Well done~" The other man's voice had a bit of a singsong tone to it as he spoke. "Despite the fact that you couldn't see anything and I'm sure your legs weren't completely awake yet, you were almost completely steady on your feet, if not a bit slow. Most of the other initiates who have tried that same challenge ended up going entirely off course or fell down before they could reach this point. Perhaps you really are meant to be a Grimleal, if Grima has taken enough of an interest in you to lead you so steadily~" As much as Shulk wanted to shout that he had no interest in becoming a Grimleal or that Grima 'leading him' was complete bullshit, he wasn't exactly in any kind of condition to object.

In the next moment, the blond felt something pointy pressed up against his chest, poking through his sweater and aiming at his heart. If he fell forward, it was likely he'd end up impaling himself on whatever it was. There was a moment of silence as that object remained prodded up against his chest before it was finally revealed what the sharp item really was.

"This sword that rests atop your heart was forged from one of Grima's fangs." The man explained. "Many great Grimleal have sworn their lives to our god over this sword, and it too has accepted you. Swear fealty to Grima, as he is kind enough to accept you as one of our own." *I'd sooner storm Mechonis unarmed!* Shulk wanted to spit. The last thing he wanted to do was proclaim he was loyal to a god of a world he didn't even belong to, even worse when it was a god of destruction that wanted nothing more than to see every last human die in a raging inferno. Instead of yelling like an angry Tirkin, however, Shulk just briskly shook his head.

"My life has already been devoted to a god." He stated calmly, wondering just how many of the people in the room he had angered with just those words alone. "I was born from the Bionis and I belong to it. There is no other god for me." Some of the cultists in the room muttered things to themselves, and Shulk was sure he had heard 'Bionis' mentioned more than once. Of course they were confused, Bionis didn't exist as part of this world. Finally, the sword was removed from the belligerent blond's chest as the other man strode forward until he was just about standing on Shulk's feet.

"You will be a very powerful member of the Grimleal if you accept, as the Fell Dragon has already deemed you worthy of his love. This... Bionis of yours. You will relinquish your beliefs in it and follow Grima instead." There was a certain irritation to his voice, as apparently he hadn't been expecting Shulk to refuse the offer after being told that he would be taken in with open arms. And yet, another head shake was given.

"I would be a fool to not believe that the very land I live upon does not exist." The Homs explained. "The Bionis is not only my god, but my home. I cannot defect from the Bionis and

proclaim my own residence a falsity. You demand something that I cannot do." If the cultists weren't angry before, they were likely irate by now. The man holding the sword made from Grima's fang stormed around behind Shulk and flicked the cloak the teen was wearing over his shoulder. Shulk was very confused, but not for long, as a moment later he felt an immense pain when his back was sliced open with the weapon. Yelling loudly, the poor young man tried to stay on his feet after being attacked but failed, sinking to his knees and hissing loudly.

"We will make you serve Grima, then." The man said. "This weapon is cursed, you know. As long as it remains untreated, it will feel like your back is on fire ceaselessly. We refuse to treat you until you surrender to Grima." He wasn't kidding either. Once the pain of the initial slice had faded a bit, an even worse ache took its place, feeling like his back had been pressed against hot coals and nobody could take him away from them. The blindfold still affixed to his face was completely soaked through with tears, as he couldn't help but cry from the terrible agony he was in.

After a moment where the two men listened to Shulk howl in pain, the other cloaked cultist walked forward and knelt in front of the boy. Gently, he pressed something metallic up against Shulk's mouth. "Open your mouth, for your own good." His voice was calmer than his partner's, which made the suffering seer comply more easily, opening up his mouth by several centimeters. It was enough to allow some rather thick liquid to enter his mouth that he very nearly spit back out after tasting a bit of a metallic tinge to it. Having tasted the particular substance before, he was well aware of what he was being forced to drink.

It was blood. He knew the flavor from licking off minor wounds he had given himself in his weapons lab back in Colony 9.

Despite that, Shulk reluctantly swallowed the mouthful of the nasty stuff that he was given, feeling the liquid run all the way down his throat. Once it hit his stomach, there was a strange sensation. Almost immediately, the burning from the cursed sword wound faded to a dull ache, but only for a couple seconds. Even after the terrible pain returned, Shulk could feel something warm settling within his chest. Immensely confused, he tried to pose the question, but pain rendered speech impossible. Thankfully, the cloaked man figured out what was going on quickly enough, offering up another, larger sip of blood. It gave the seer enough time to finally give the question without being disrupted by horrible pain at least.

"W-why... Why is that blood making my wound stop burning?" The Homs inquired meekly. Though Shulk couldn't see it, there was a nasty smile on the man's face. He had Shulk exactly where he wanted him, and at this rate, he was sure it wouldn't be long before submission was ensured.

"What you're drinking is the blood of the Fell Dragon." He explained. "Grima himself would surely be powerful enough to counteract his own curse, yes? Until you get proper treatment for your wound, this will be your only source of relief from the pain, and it's only a temporary one. If you down the whole goblet full of it, you'll be able to sleep through the night. Otherwise, good luck trying to get any kind of rest with the pain of a wound of that size. Heheheh~" By this point, the curse had returned to its full strength and it would take another sip of blood in order to get anything coherent out of the poor guy. He begged and pleaded for several seconds between shouts of pure pain before another sip was finally offered, allowing proper speech once more.

"...Please, what do I have to do to receive the whole goblet?! Gaah!" Shulk had very nearly not gotten the words out in time before the pain resumed once more. Even after several goes of this back and forth already, he was still not used to any part of it - the taste and consistency of the blood, how much relief he felt after drinking, and the contrast of the awful burning sensation once it returned. It was a miracle he hadn't already passed out from the amount of agony he was in.

"...Tell you what." The man stated. "All you have to do is say a phrase for me without screaming it or stuttering over your words and it's yours. Perhaps Grima has mercy on your poor soul and will guide your tongue. Even though you forsook him just a little while ago, it's hard to lose favor of a god who seems to be so keenly interested in you." The other man scoffed loudly, causing his companion to stop for a moment before finally giving the sentence that needed to be said. "You need to say 'I am a selfish pig that refused the love of a god'. Go on, I don't have all night."

This was going to be a massive blow to the blond's dignity, but it was either that or suffer for the rest of the night. Honestly, a bit of lost dignity around people who didn't even care about it was the lesser of two evils in his mind, and therefore he decided that he would attempt to say it. Inhaling deeply, he tried to mentally prepare, knowing full well that all while he was saying this, the curse would still be burning on his back. It took a few seconds and several deep breaths before he gave his first try.

"...I am a... selfish... Gyah!" Nope, so much for that first attempt. The other cultists in the room were giggling at Shulk's pain, convinced that he wasn't going to be able to do it. He wanted to prove those bastards wrong, and so a second attempt was made. "...I am a selfish pig... that refused... GOD!" That wasn't him attempting to skip a few words so much as another outburst of agony. Yet more laughter. How many more attempts would be allowed before the challenge would be dropped and he would have to suffer? Perhaps the third time would be the charm.

Prior to this attempt, the warm feeling in Shulk's stomach welled up again, somehow causing a relapse of the blood's soothing effect just long enough to allow for a proper utterance of the phrase. "...I am a selfish pig that refused the love of a god!" He managed to get out before that momentary relief disappeared. All of the cultists were completely taken aback, gasping and muttering to themselves. Even the man who had offered the goblet in the first place was completely shocked that Shulk had managed to do it.

"I can't believe it..." He mumbled. "Grima still offers his love to this undeserving fool... Just what is it that he sees in the boy? But a promise is a promise." The cup was forced into Shulk's bound, sleeping hands. Shulk was barely capable of holding it between the awkwardness of the bindings and the pain of his back. He nevertheless didn't spill a single drop of the blood as he drank down the entire goblet full of the stuff, sighing with relief once finished.

"...We're done here tonight." The other cloaked man stated with venom in his voice, preparing a spell. "There's nothing more we can do for now. We shall await for daylight to continue. Perhaps Grima will have given up hope on the brat by then." After that, Shulk felt the sensation of falling for a moment before landing face down on the floor. The weight of the ropes attached to his neck were finally gone, as was the oppressive feeling of the room.

Finally figuring this was his chance to do so, the seer finally pulled the blindfold off his face and folded down his hood, stomach flipping as he realized that he had been teleported back into the small cell that he had awakened within earlier. His back was still quite sore despite having taken the temporary pain reliever, but it wasn't so bad that he wouldn't be able to get some rest. Knowing that he only had as much time as the blood would allow to sleep, the seer curled up into a ball and closed his eyes, hoping that his dreams wouldn't be so bad as to torment him out of what little sleep he was being afforded. Thoughts immediately turned to Robin as the poor boy shivered in his sleep. When would the tactician finally come and save him from this ordeal?

Chapter End Notes

After one failed draft of this chapter and 3539 words, TBC. Note time.

1. My first draft was scrapped for being too sexual in nature. I don't want this particular fic to go above a T rating, so physical, mental, and psychological torture is as far I'll go. Perhaps in another story I'll actually go as far as slip something sexual in nature in, but not this time.

2. Initially I wanted to rework in a custom skin into this chapter for the sake of making sure it was clear that Robin's entire sequence there was just a dream. Eventually I figured the implausibility of the whole situation by the end of it (what with Shulk becoming Grima's vessel and the supposedly-dead dragon actually coming back as a silhouette) would be proof enough that it was all in Robin's head.

3. I actually did quite a bit of research into types of rituals organizations do to initiate their members and I've incorporated some of this into the chapter here. Some of the things that they do to haze new members are pretty disgusting, really.

This is the last chapter going up before I go back to school. Grad school, wonderful... As a result, daily chapters are going to likely cease. There's not much more to this, don't worry. I'm going to predict a total of 6 chapters, so this is the halfway mark.

The Darkest Hour

Chapter Summary

A threat from another timeline threatens to drive a stake through the young lovers' relationship. Things go from bad to worse for both of the young heroes, but perhaps there is hope as the time for a rescue draws near. This is their darkest hour, so it will only grow brighter from here.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"There, finished all my preparations." Robin noted to himself as he left the weapon shop, readjusting the leather strap around his right shoulder and left armpit that he had just put on. Attached at the back of the strap was the Monado; the sword's center plate was tightly wrapped with the leather, preventing it from falling off the tactician's back. Additionally, Robin had purchased some new weapons for himself, ones he knew he could use properly. The strongest weapons that were being sold in the main weapons store were all made of steel, and thus the ivory haired male purchased a Steel Sword for a relatively cheap price. Additionally, he had managed to get another Arcfire tome from a peddler for a far more exuberant cost. Still, he wanted the tome just in case of an emergency (and he wanted to replace the one he'd lost too). The letter was also well on its way to Ylisse to inform Chrom about the situation at hand.

All that was left to be done was to search for the missing Monado wielder. He could honestly be anywhere in the Theocracy of Plegia, really. In fact, though Robin really hoped it wasn't the case, he could be sold as a slave to neighboring lands. Gods, the mental imagery of Shulk being sold off as a slave in Valm was utterly cringeworthy, as that would probably be the last place Robin would look in hopes that the poor young man was somewhere on the Ylissean Continent still. There was one point that stood out in Robin's mind about the attack that gave the tactician hope that his lover was still somewhere in Plegia and not in the captivity of slavers, though: Robin himself had not been apprehended. If the brigands wanted slaves, both of the young men would have been captured. After all, even if Robin was hardly as strong as Shulk, he was still a rather fit young adult who had his fair share of stamina, both out in the fields and in bed. A potential investment like him would not have been left in the sand to die.

It was at a time like this that Robin wished that he had a picture of Shulk on hand so that he could easily show off the portrait of the Homs to people and ask them if they had seen a young man that looked like him. Instead he was going to have to describe the blond to whomever he could lend an ear from. And then there was the matter of getting people to actually talk with him in the first place. He had the advantage of being dressed in the same colors as most of the Plegian people, but how many people would actually heed a man on the side of the road? After all, most would likely assume him to be a beggar if he was trying to pull people aside, despite the fact that the lush purple robe in good condition and the beautiful red sword on his back are hardly belongings a beggar would have. As for those who would give him heed, there was a large chance that they would have no idea as to who Shulk was or where he could possibly be.

Eventually Robin decided that he'd amble around the city and ask whomever he could about Shulk. Perhaps in his wandering, the tactician might stumble upon a clue without really looking for it or, if he was REALLY lucky, Shulk himself. The desert sun was going to be hot, though.

Robin didn't exactly want to stay out in the direct heat for too long, or else he'd end up passing out from heat stroke. Slinking about in the shadows, on the other hand, was a good way to get jumped by thieves, as they always hung around in the shade, looking for unsuspecting people to mug. And thus it was decided that the mage would mostly keep to the main streets, but if he felt hot at all, he would just dip into alleyways to cool off, staying on guard the whole time.

So the hunt began. "Excuse me, can I ask you a question?" Robin inquired of a woman who was walking his way. As he expected, she just brushed right past and didn't even look at him. Unabashed, he tried again and again with every person who walked in his direction. Most of the time, he was completely ignored. Other times, the tactician was told that the person was busy or that he needed to get lost (with varying degrees of rudeness). Probably only two people in about an hour and a half of inquiry actually stopped to see what Robin wanted, and neither of them had any clue about Shulk. It was when the mage ducked into an alleyway to cool off that he started to think that the whole idea was completely stupid. For once, the genius tactician was stumped and without a coherent plan. How was he supposed to get any kind of clue about where his dear Homs lover had been whisked away to?

Even though Robin had been sure to check the alleyway for hiding thieves before resting up against a wall, he hadn't expected there to be a side door to one of the buildings, nor for it to open up just then. A man came out, took one look at Robin, and immediately yelled back inside. Seconds later, a slew of individuals had filed through the door and were all staring hungrily at the young man that they had just singled out as a target. It was enough for the tactician's heart to do a flip as he staggered back a step. This wasn't good at all. Before he could turn about face and start running away, somebody quickly slipped their hands over his head, tightly pressing a gag into his mouth. The surprised yelp that would have been uttered was muffled to a quiet grunt as the fabric was stuffed into his face. Of course some of the vagabonds went through the front door in order to launch a pincer attack. Robin's mistake was not running immediately when he saw the first guy come out the door. Once the gag was quickly tied off, the ivory haired man's flailing arms were then grabbed and pinioned helplessly behind his back. To think that he had gotten himself so carelessly captured... How was Shulk supposed to get rescued now if Robin himself was in need of rescuing too?

Just then, a voice called out beside the tactician from a man who was waving his arms to the others. "Hold on, hold on!" He shouted. "This is that guy I was talkin' about last night! I'd recognize that nifty sword of his from anywhere!" There was chattering among the rogues for several seconds before the man that was holding Robin's arms back let go of them, allowing the mage to pull the rag off his face. Now he was utterly confused.

"...So you're just letting me go?" He inquired, scratching his head in puzzlement. "All because I'm some guy you failed to rob the other night?"

"We're not just lettin' ya go without seein' some of those moves we 'eard about!" One of the other men said. "Our buddy here claimed ya flipped Ol' Lanu onto Harris, bounced right over Lanu's head and got Speedy to trip over 'im, and finally pole vaulted over Lanu's stomach right before smackin' Speedy in the face, all with just a blunt sword!"

"Same one sittin' on 'is back there, even!" The guy who had saved Robin called out.

"Ya got moves, buddy!" A third man elbowed the tactician a little too rough, causing poor Robin to rub his arm in discomfort. "Come on, we gotta see somma dat again! What's yer name?" Grunting, Robin started to protest.

"...Please, I really need to..."

"Yer name, boy! Don't make us change our minds!" A loud sigh left the white haired mage at the

same time as he facepalmed.

"Okay, okay..." He said. "My name is Robin..." Before any further complaints could be made, all of the rogues started laughing at the same time.

"Robin!" One of the other men finally said, still half laughing. "That's a funny name fer a guy our bud couldn't actually end up muggin'! There's no robbin' Robin here!" Robin did have to admit that it was a bit ironic, but that was besides the point right now. He really needed to get back to the search for Shulk, after all.

"As amusing as this is, I really need to start searching for my friend again." The mage stated, turning around as if to walk past all of the rogues back out onto the streets. However, right as he started to walk away, the large guy who had restrained Robin during his near-capture a little earlier reached out and grabbed his right hand, causing Robin to grunt uncomfortably as he tried to wrestle his wrist away. It was a vain effort though, as the guy was considerably stronger than the white haired male. Considering it was also his right hand that had been grabbed, he couldn't effectively get to the Steel Sword tucked into his robes, nor did he have the time and space for invoking a spell from the Arcfire tome. Grabbing the Monado was also out of the question because of the way he had secured it to his back. Robin silently wished that he had just a bit more strength than he already did. Even Shulk, who used to be sick and weak, was stronger than him.

The man holding onto Robin's arm smirked, backing the young man up into a wall so there was little room for him to move. "You promised us you were gonna show us some of those fancy moves of yers, Robin... Unless ya want us to actually rob ya."

"Let go of me, please! I'm begging you!" The poor guy sounded like he might actually start crying. "My friend might be in danger! He was kidnapped yesterday a little before sundown and I'm scared that he's been badly hurt!" Tears were beginning to well up in his eyes as Robin began to wonder if he was ever going to see Shulk again. But right before hope was completely lost, another one of the rogues spoke up.

"Wait, yesterday before sundown?" A distinctly feminine voice said. "My friend mentioned something about a job he was hired to do the other day. Something about disrupting a teleportation spell and then capturing some guy who came out of it. But then after it started, the lady in charge changed her mind and she wanted the other guy instead, as they didn't have a second dragon to catch both of the guys. Too much weight to haul through the desert, you know?" Robin's stomach did a flip, realizing that sounded exactly like what had happened to him and Shulk.

"...What happened to the guy that got captured? Do you know what he looked like?" Robin asked, praying to whatever god he could that the woman actually knew the answer to the question. His free hand had slipped under his robe and found its way to his Arcfire tome. He was quietly chanting the spell under his breath from memory, waiting for his opportunity to use it so he could make an escape once he got the information he needed.

The woman seemed to be oblivious to Robin's plan as she gave a small shrug and started to explain what she knew. "I think he got hauled off to The Dragon's Table. Something about getting 'im used to our society or... I dunno. I think my buddy said something about blond hair, blue eyes, and weird clothes that weren't from anywhere around here." Yep, that definitely described Shulk. And it looked like the woman had an idea as to where he was, as well. Silently Robin thanked Naga before speaking up again, a certain confidence sparkling in his chocolate colored eyes.

"So, you guys wanted to see some of my cool escape tricks, huh?" Everybody nodded their heads and smiled expectantly, waiting for Robin to do his thing. "Well... you're in luck! Time for me to hit the road! Arcfire!" The mage threw the spell at his feet, a giant pillar of flames erupting near his shoes. It was enough to surprise the burly guy who had pushed Robin against the wall and

forced him back in order to avoid having his hand roasted by the fire. All of the bandits gasped and backed off a step, leaving enough room for the white haired male to start weaving his way through the crowd. Realizing what was going on, the thieves all started to try to grab their escaping quarry. Their efforts failed miserably as the white haired male made it back out onto the main streets and into the public eye once more.

Robin knew what he had to do now. He had to go to The Dragon's Table where he would finally be able to rescue Shulk from the Grimleal. This knowledge was enough to breathe new energy into his weary bones and put a certain spring to his step. *Shulk, I'm coming...* He thought. *I'll save you soon, just hold on...*

Child... Wake up child...

A soothing feminine voice called out to Shulk while he slept, but he did not respond. While the curse on his back was lacking in strength thanks to the disgusting liquid that he had been forced to drink, the blond wanted to get in as much sleep as he could. The burning sensation was essentially an alarm clock waiting to go off at any given moment without the Homs knowing when that time was going to be. The woman trying to disrupt his sleep was something he really didn't want to deal with right now.

And then it happened. A sharp jolt of pain ran through the seer's back, causing him to yelp as he quickly woke up and looked around the cell. Just as quickly the curse faded again, as if it had been temporarily activated just to awaken him. Shulk almost screamed again upon realizing that there was somebody else in the cell with him, standing over him with a hood covering their face and glowing red eyes. What prevented him from doing so was the next thing that was said.

"You're awake, child. Give me your hands." The same female voice from earlier emanated from the figure standing before the seer. A little nervous as to what she was planning, Shulk slowly offered up his arms, which were still bound from the night prior. Before he could react, the hooded woman pulled out a knife and deftly sliced through the ropes, allowing Shulk to finally move his hands freely once more after she had finished. Immediately he took them back and started rubbing his wrists, as they were extremely sore due to being bound together for hours.

"Thank you." The young man said quietly, looking the woman's attire up and down now that he wasn't completely panicked by her presence. It then came to his attention that the other was wearing a purple tactician robe not unlike the one Robin wore. And the more he thought about it, Shulk realized that he recognized the woman's voice, heart skipping a beat once he figured it out. "...Reflet!" He exclaimed, perhaps a little too loud. Reflet was Robin's female counterpart from an alternate timeline as well as a fellow Smasher, and she was a tactician who was just as skilled on the battlefield as Shulk's own beloved. "Thank Bionis! I'm so glad you came to my rescue..." The female tactician's glowing red eyes narrowed slightly before she shook her head.

"I didn't come here to rescue you." Reflet stated coldly, which caused Shulk to frown in confusion. Before he could ask more, she continued. "I am not the Reflet you're familiar with, after all."

"...You're not Reflet?" But she sounded just like the female tactician and even wore the same coat. The only thing that didn't add up was the glowing red eyes, but otherwise he could have sworn it was her. "If you're not here to rescue me, why did you break into my cell, much less bother cutting my hands free?" Not bothering to give an answer, the woman sat down in front of Shulk and gently clasped her hands around his cheeks, leaning forward to place a gentle kiss on his lips for several seconds before pulling back. A small grin had found its way to her face, visible even in this light despite her hood.

"You interest me, boy." She stated, still holding onto Shulk's face. "There's a power that sleeps within you, steadily growing stronger. Soon you will have enough power to rival the gods." After that, she folded back her hood to reveal that her general appearance was identical to Reflet's, what with white hair and two long ponytails on each side of her head. However, her eyes were bright red and there were purple marks that looked like two more sets of eyes running down her cheeks. Almost immediately Shulk's heart plummeted into his gut upon looking at her face. Smirking slightly, she continued. "That is why I must subjugate you. I was the one who ordered for your capture instead of my original target of the other tactician. He'll be here soon anyway for your sake, and I'll just capture him then. But you need special attention, child who could challenge the gods. With your gift of foresight, you would be a force to be reckoned with among my greatest soldiers." As much as Shulk wanted to protest that his visions were useless due to there not being any Ether on Ylisse, he couldn't find the nerve to talk back to the red eyed enchantress at that moment.

The only word that left his mouth was a barely whispered "Grima". Smiling, she gently pushed a piece of hair back behind Shulk's ear before leaning in to give him another gentle kiss for several seconds. He didn't bother move away as he silently let the white haired woman do that.

"That's right... I am the Fell Dragon Grima. You're a very intelligent young man, that much I can tell~" Chuckling, Grima grabbed her target's throat, albeit not hard enough to start cutting off air to his lungs. "Perhaps that is the true reason why my vessel in this timeline chose for you to be his partner... Your intelligence rivals his own, and he's scared of you as a result." This seemed to be enough to snap Shulk out of whatever spell the dragon's words had over him, causing him to shake his head briskly.

"You're wrong!" He protested. "Robin's not afraid of my intelligence, he loves it! He tells me I'm one of the most interesting people he's ever had the honour to meet!" Grima looked completely unabashed by Shulk's outburst, tightening her hold on his throat a little as she spoke up again.

"...Did you ever think that you were perhaps even more interesting than he was?" She stated calmly. "Think about it... You're everything he is, but better: stronger, faster, taller, perhaps even smarter... And to top it off, you're not even human! Your very existence threatens to make his moot, and he's not very self-confident at all. And that was why he clung to you so quickly... He wanted to drag you down to his level." Everything Grima said was true... No, Shulk couldn't afford to think like that.

"No, that's not true!" The seer barked. "My role and his are very different! I don't have the tactical genius to replace him." Shulk greatly admired the way Robin could hatch up convoluted plans on the fly which usually seemed to work. Conversely, Shulk had to think through everything in order to come up with a plan of attack. They were quite different in how they thought about strategy.

The dragon didn't seem very amused by Shulk's back talking, and she finally removed her hand from his neck before snapping her fingers. Immediately the horrible burning sensation enveloped the blond's back once more, causing him to cry out in pain. Smirking, Grima ordered for him to lay down on her lap. Realizing that he was probably going to be tortured until he complied, Shulk hesitantly did so, resting his head on her thigh. Almost immediately afterward, the burning ceased as she started running a hand through his hair. "Good boy~" She teased, continuing to pet the young man in her lap as if he was a dog. It didn't take long for Shulk to realize that she had already achieved her goal of subjugating him, as she likely was controlling her blood that had permeated into his own after being absorbed by his body. If he didn't follow her orders, she would just torture him until they were done. No wonder she had made it so he would succeed at the challenge posed last night... It was all part of the plan.

The child who could challenge the gods was now a slave to the Fell Dragon.

Chapter End Notes

TBC with 3549 words. Notes:

1. Small world when it comes to the thieves, right? I figured I should throw the poor guys a bit of a bone (either that or have Robin wander around aimlessly for another 5 chapters, which would just be purple prose, honestly) and made it so the thieves from chapter 2 as well as the kidnappers from chapter 1 had relations to one another.

2. The 'one wyvern' is my excuse for why both Shulk and Robin weren't taken in by the Grimleal. Besides, Shulk's not from the world, so he'd probably wander around aimlessly and likely die instead of coming to rescue Robin, which was another unspoken reason why Shulk was taken instead. At least Robin knows his way around the continent.

3. Robin and Reflet aren't siblings in this story! They come different time periods in the Awakening canon. Robin's timeline is post-Chrom ending, whereas Reflet's is prior to the timeskip. That's why Reflet!Grima exists still. Why is she in Robin's Ylisse though? She came through an Outrealm Gate, bored because Reflet, Chrom, and Lucina left for the Super Smash Bros. Tournament in her own timeline. The only person from Robin's timeline participating in the tournament is Robin, explaining why Robin had arranged for a meeting with Chrom in Ylisstol to begin with.

4. Remember that Shulk here is pre-Prison Island. As a result, Zanza is still residing within him, providing him life, and Shulk hasn't awakened the power of his own Monado yet. Grima is somehow aware that Shulk has the power of his own Monado that just hasn't manifested yet, which is why she calls him the 'child who could challenge the gods'.

The Rescue

Chapter Summary

Robin finally launches an attack on The Dragon's Table in an attempt to get Shulk back. However, getting him back is not going to be easy, especially when the Grimleal reveal to want him dead. Plus, a terrible surprise awaits Robin once he gets to the heart of the cult's establishment...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After spending most of the day traveling across the desert, Robin finally found himself in front of the establishment that he had been told Shulk was being captive within - The Dragon's Table. It was a very old altar, dating back from before the days of the Hero King Marth even. The place still gave Robin the creeps even though Grima was gone, probably because of one of his earliest memories that still remained after Grima had tried to possess him. It was the one he had prior to meeting the Shepherds, a premonition that he was supposed to kill Chrom at that very location. Even though that future had changed, the memory still remained. If just one vision of the future was enough to permanently rattle Robin, he had to give Shulk major kudos for managing to stay sane despite seeing one bad future after another thanks to his sword. He really was the stronger of the two of them. If their roles had been reversed, Shulk probably would have rescued Robin by now. This wasn't the time to focus on what-ifs, though. There was a Homs in need of saving here.

And speaking of Shulk's sword, Robin really needed to make an adjustment to his outfit. The bright red Monado hanging from his back was going to be a major eyecatch among the dark purple and black robes that the Plegians wore. In order to hide the sword, he was going to need to take off his cloak and readjust so that the leather strap was tied across the beige bolero he wore underneath. With as much haste as possible, he made the adjustments needed and threw his cloak on once again. The concealed weapon made his robe stick out a little on the side, but it was a lot less noticeable than having the weapon out in the open where everybody could see its shiny red frame.

Going through the front door of the place was asking for trouble, as it was likely the place was crawling with Grimleal. That meant Robin was going to need to find another way into the establishment or sneak in under the pretense being one of the cultists in question. Perhaps even a little bit of both. He did wear Plegian colors, so he could just put up his hood and hopefully nobody would find anything suspicious about his tactician robes. It was a bit risky, seeing as if anybody caught on, he'd be apprehended in a heartbeat. Lurking in the shadows as often as he could was his best bet. Of course, he needed to get inside the establishment quickly enough, as the sun was still bearing down on the ivory haired male. He'd been traveling through the desert for a while now and was staring to really get hot.

Thankfully enough, there was a window somewhat off to the side that had been broken at one point in the past and never fixed. Seeing as Robin was so small, he managed to squeeze in without little difficulty. His robe got caught slightly on a rather pointy piece of glass, but he managed to unhook it with little difficulty. Somehow the mage had avoided getting cut by the glass, miraculously enough. After slipping indoors, he noticed that there wasn't anybody in the room he had been trying to get into. As a result, Robin grunted slightly, realizing that his sneaky endeavor

had been for naught. Well, now that he was inside, it was time to go exploring. He put up his hood and paced forward, trying not to look like he was in a hurry, even if he was.

There were a bunch of people walking around aimlessly once out of the main hallway, which made it much harder to lurk around without bringing attention to himself, and so he opted to just hide in plain sight in this area. Individuals were muttering things to themselves and pacing around back and forth in the dozens here, after all. As much as he wanted to ask about what was going on, Robin had a feeling that would attract too much attention to himself. Besides, he had other ways of gathering information besides asking outright. For a while he just lingered around the area, listening in real close to anybody talking in hopes that they would have something to say about the situation here. It was about ten minutes later when he finally got something worthwhile out of two of the cultists speaking to each other.

"Shouldn't the second day of the initiation be starting soon?" One of the cloaked individuals said a little too loudly. The person he was addressing shrugged slightly before responding in a female voice.

"I would think so, but we haven't heard anything yet." She said. "Perhaps we should just go to the Eclipse Room and just wait. I still can't believe that kid managed to succeed at that challenge, though."

"You have to admit the circumstances were weird, however." The male cultist said, walking along beside the person he was talking to, likely toward the Eclipse Room that they had mentioned. "Right before he blurted out that sentence, the guy's eyes started glowing blue. I'm wondering if Brother Uri was as rattled as Brother Lucius clearly was." Following that, the two began to walk away. Glowing blue eyes... Shulk couldn't possibly have had a vision, as the Monado was with the tactician. What could possibly be the reason if it wasn't the doing of the Sword of the Bionis?

"Excuse me!" A voice called out loudly as a hand found its way to Robin's shoulder. The tactician very nearly jumped out of his robe upon feeling the other's touch, but keeping himself calm, he turned around to face the individual who had called out for him.

"...Can I help you?" The ivory haired male asked, lowering his voice a little so that it wasn't completely obvious that it was him just from the vocal tone. However, it seemed that only made the guy back off, shaking his head briskly to show through the hood he was wearing.

"Oh, sorry, I thought you were somebody else." He said. "You haven't seen somebody else wearing a cloak like yours around, have you? She's the one I'm actually looking for." After shaking his head briskly to show that he hadn't seen anybody like that, thoughts started circling through the young man's mind.

There's somebody else here wearing the same cloak as me... Another tactician? He thought. *And the fact that he said 'she'... Wait a minute, it couldn't possibly be Reflet... could it?* Robin was sure Reflet had no interest in coming to his Ylisse because she didn't want to know what happened in the future. But who else would have a tactician robe like his own? By this point, the other cultist had walked off, probably still searching for the woman he was searching for. Of course, now that Robin thought about it, the fact that he had revealed himself as not being the person that man was looking for meant that once that guy found who he was looking for, they would know in an instant that he was snooping around. Oops.

Realizing that he was going to have to change out his robe so he was less conspicuous now, Robin looked around for somebody he could hopefully pull aside without attracting too much attention. Eyes fell upon an individual in a jet black robe who was just sitting around idly, and so the tactician wandered forward to talk. "You." He tried to raise the pitch of his voice this time in an attempt to sound more feminine. "Come with me. There's something you have to do for me."

The cultist slowly craned his neck over to look at Robin, staring back at him with blood red eyes.

"...You're not her..." He said slowly before standing up and sauntering forward with a strange gait. "You're not the lady..." It didn't take long for Robin to realize that the cultist he just bothered was actually a Risen due to the zombie-like way he was walking. What were Risen doing here among Plegian cultists? Not wishing to find out, the tactician immediately turned face and just started running away in the direction he had seen the two go earlier, hoping that he'd find the Eclipse Room. Maybe just getting away from that main corridor would be enough to avoid running into that man and whoever the other individual in the tactician robe was. The attempt to change his robe had all but been abandoned by this point.

The passageway to the Eclipse room got darker and darker the further one went down through it. Robin thought he was going to bump into somebody by accident and throw his hood off by falling to the ground, revealing his identity. These thoughts occurred at more than one time while hurrying down the passageway. Thankfully, the tactician didn't end up running into anybody as he finally made his way into what he assumed was the Eclipse Room.

Almost immediately he was accosted by the powerful smell of burning candles and a dark smog covering the entire top of the room. Everybody on the audience side of the room was sitting down, facing three cloaked individuals on the other side of the room; two standing and one on their knees between them. Carefully, Robin sat down behind the others, wondering what was going on here. The Monado on his back made him have to sit a bit awkwardly, so he just had to hope nobody would notice. People were murmuring among themselves, though none of what they were saying could be determined. Nobody seemed to be all that bothered by the last minute addition to the group though.

A little over a minute later, one of the tall men standing on the other side of the room finally spoke up, addressing everybody present. "Brothers and sisters!" He announced. "We have all gathered here for the second part of the ritual that began yesterday. Between that time and today, he has agreed to forego his ties to other gods. Our meeting here today is to watch as he breaks bonds with his old god and takes up the Fell Dragon as his new one." Following that, the kneeling individual stood up and addressed everybody in the room.

"...Yes, that is correct." Robin's heart immediately sank as he quickly recognized the owner of the voice, between his foreign accent and his soft-spoken way of talking. It was Shulk! Was he seriously about to give up on the Bionis and accept Grima as his god instead? No, Robin couldn't let that happen! He just needed to wait for the right moment to hurry up to the Homs and whisk him away from this place. For now, he just sat and waited, listening closely. "The Fell Dragon has showed me love, and I will return the favour by showing my love back."

"Then take this sword, child." The other cloaked cultist said, offering Shulk a long sword with a golden hilt. "You remember this blade from yesterday, do you not?" The Homs slowly nodded his head before taking the weapon, holding it gingerly in both hands. "With it, you must draw blood from the dragon and baptize yourself in it to be cured of your curse and become one of our own." Wait, Shulk had been cursed? Was that the only reason why he had agreed to become a Grimleal? He decided to listen a little more to the other man who had spoken up just then.

"The failed avatar of Grima shall be upon us soon." He said. "With this sword, you must draw his blood in order to save yourself. Kill him if you wish to live." So that was his mission... Shulk was being forced to kill Robin himself if he wanted to be free from his curse.

"...I will." Shulk stated with little hesitation, nodding visibly for everybody to see. Robin couldn't bear to see any more of this, standing up while nodding slowly. Other cultists turned when they

heard rustling nearby, wondering what was going on. Even the men at the front turned upon seeing commotion.

"Shulk!" Robin's voice echoed throughout the entire room. The young man in question gasped, taking a step back as he finally looked up to see past the hood covering his eyes. It was easy to see that his sapphire irises were clouded over in pain, likely due to the curse he was suffering from. "Listen to what you're saying!" Robin bravely walked forward, knowing full well that he was likely going to die now that he had revealed himself. Once in the middle of the room, the tactician pulled down his hood and shook his head to allow the silver locks to fall into their proper place. Shulk once again gasped loudly, taking another step back away from the mage. "This isn't the kind of person you are! I know better than that!"

"Avatar!" One of the two men barked. "You dare set foot in this establishment and even foolishly revealed yourself knowing full well we're hunting for your head?!" As if on cue, the other man cast Nosferatu, binding Robin where he stood. Even though the dark magic was eating away at the tactician's energy, he remained calm, continuing to stare at Shulk. The two young men silently conversed with their eyes for a moment before Robin finally spoke up, ignoring the pain and the two men surrounding his lover.

"...Shulk, I don't know what those bastards have done to you, but I know you better than anybody else in this room." He stated calmly. "I'll stand here all day and endure the pain of this spell if it means showing you how much I care..." His brown eyes were beginning to cloud over in pain, and it was clear that despite what the tactician was saying, he wasn't going to last much longer under the effect of the spell. It was up to Shulk to do something about the situation if he wanted Robin to live.

Fortunately, it seemed that Robin's words had gotten through to Shulk. Several seconds later, he brandished the cursed sword, lobbing off one of the hands of the man casting Nosferatu. It made him shriek in pain and immediately stop the spell. The other man gasped loudly as he hurried over to his companion, trying to help him out. At the same time, Shulk leaped forward and grabbed Robin before he fell to the ground. "You're right." He whispered to the man in his arms, squeezing him gently. "They can't control me like that... I'd never hurt you." Robin's eyes began to well up as he used what little strength still remained to throw himself into the arms of the man he loved.

However, the other cultists were less than happy with how the ritual was going. A very angry Grima who was sitting in the crowd immediately lifted the numbing effect her blood had on Shulk, causing him to scream out in pain and drop Robin. Other Grimleal cast spells against the two, bombarding them with dark magic. It didn't take long before Shulk collapsed on top of Robin, pinning him down. The brother whose hand hadn't been lobbed off was probably the angriest of them all, casting his teleportation spell yet again on both of the young men. It sent their bodies spiraling through the floor and back into the cell Shulk had been contained within. Now both Shulk and Robin were captives of the cult.

Robin woke up to the sound of crying. It was breathless and rhythmic, sending chills throughout the tactician's entire body. It didn't take long before he was lucid again and realized the crying was coming from Shulk, who was huddled in a corner of the room and shivering ceaselessly. The Homs' skin was deathly pale and those red rings that had been seen in the nightmare were present in the young man's eyes. In a way, the nightmare had come true: Shulk really was under the control of the Fell Dragon right now. And that just broke Robin's heart. But one of the cultists had given Robin hope to save the man he loved.

"...Shulk." Robin whispered calmly, crawling over to where the blond was sitting. "There's a

mark of your curse on your body, right? Tell me where this curse mark is." Gasping slightly between sobs, Shulk raised his head to look at Robin for a moment before shaking it.

"N-no..." His voice was hoarse, likely from crying so much. "I-I won't allow you to... die for my sake..." Acknowledging the boy's concern, Robin shook his head and reached out to clasp his hands around one of the blond's.

"I won't die. Promise. I just want to free you from your curse. I love you, and I don't want to see you suffering like this..." There was a determination in the mage's chocolate eyes as he stared intently into the scarlet-ringed eyes of his lover. They shared a moment of silence together, reading each other's eyes. Finally, Shulk nodded his head slowly.

"A-all right... I'll show you." He said, slowly removing his dark purple cloak to reveal the gray sweater he always wore underneath it. Turning around, he revealed the slice across his back that had bled a bit onto the wool and stripped the fabric at a strange diagonal. Robin gasped a little as he looked at the injury, gently sliding the sweater up so he could take a closer look at the wound itself. Surrounding the diagonal slice were inflamed purple spirals running up and down the poor boy's back. These kinds of burns were unnatural, surely the result of a curse. Robin knew what he had to do upon seeing them. He wasn't a cleric, but the cultist's clue was enough for him to work with.

"...Lay down, Shulk." Robin stated calmly. "I'm going to cure you now." Completely trusting of the tactician, Shulk nodded slowly and lowered himself onto the ground on his stomach so that the cursed wound was sticking straight up into the air. Thankfully, Robin still had all of his weapons on his person, which meant that he still had the Steel Sword with him. He didn't want to use the sword that Shulk had been given by the cultists, as he was convinced by this point that it was the weapon that caused the curse in the first place. Robin really didn't want to be cursed himself, and thus he used the Steel Sword instead. Carefully, he slit his wrist with the weapon, gasping loudly as steel cut through his flesh. It was enough of a pained gasp for Shulk to look back in hopes of seeing what was going on. It was definitely surprising to say the least to see Robin holding a sword in one hand and his other wrist spilling crimson liquid everywhere.

"...Robin, what are you doing?!" He gasped. "I thought you said you were going to cure my curse!" The ivory haired male chuckled, giving his worried young lover a smile.

"I am." The mage stated calmly, trying not to think of the immense pain he was feeling in his wrist right now. "That man said that you needed to be baptized in my blood, right? That's exactly what I'm doing." And with that, he turned his palm over and let the blood start falling from his arm onto Shulk's scar. As soon as the liquid dripped onto the wound, it evaporated immediately with a purple wisp of smoke rising from the spot where each drip landed. The blond swordsman gasped loudly as his entire body convulsed in agony. Despite this, Robin continued to pour more of his blood onto Shulk's back, noticing that the purple swirls were quickly fading as he put more and more of the liquid onto the wound. It was about another minute later before one last puff of purple smoke rose from the wound while practically screaming from Shulk's back, immediately turning the large scab running across the young man into a faded scar. One last pained gasp left Shulk's mouth before he started panting crazily. Realizing that his blood wasn't going to be causing any further comfort, Robin then started to wrap the wound up to let it start healing. Several seconds after he had finished dressing the wound, strong arms found their way around the tactician, squeezing him tightly.

"Robin, thank you so much!" Shulk said gratefully while continuing to hug the mage. "You really are a genius! I love you with my whole heart..." Smiling back at Shulk, he wrapped his arms around the young man, returning his affection. They stayed like that for a while, just relishing in each other's love. Eventually Shulk pulled back, shaking out one of his arms that had nearly fallen

asleep. It caused Robin to chuckle before something came to mind.

"Oh, you're probably tired because your hand had to wrap around the weapon I've got concealed under my cloak." He said, immediately taking said clothing piece off to reveal the leather strap underneath. Shulk gasped quietly as he quickly recognized the weapon sticking up over Robin's shoulder as the blond's own.

"...Robin, you brought the Monado all the way out here?" Shulk asked, crawling back over to the mage. A smile found its way to the ivory haired tactician's face as he undid the strap holding the weapon onto his back, giving the whole sheath to Shulk. It took all of ten seconds before Shulk had the weapon untied from its harness and attached to the swordsman's back once more. He immediately felt complete upon reclaiming the beautiful scarlet blade, entirely revitalized in an instant. Whether it was from the Monado's strength immediately kicking back in or the confidence of having his preferred weapon once more, all signs that the young man had been tortured endlessly up until a little while ago were gone. Upon looking over his shoulder at Robin again, Shulk smiled.

"Now how's about we get out of this hell hole, Robin?" He said confidently. "We can't exactly see the sunset from within this cell, you know." To further punctuate the fact that he wanted out, Shulk removed the Monado from his shoulder and flipped it open, a blue beam of light appearing between the two sides of the blade. Following two deft slashes with the scarlet sword, the bars of the cell all clattered to the ground, easily slit through by the Sword of the Bionis.

It was time for the two of them to get out of here together.

Chapter End Notes

TBC with 3791 words. Next chapter is the end! Few short notes:

1. I only alluded to it briefly, but Brother Lucius and Brother Uri are the names of the two cloaked men who've been antagonizing Shulk besides Grima. Both of those names mean 'light', which I found extremely ironic.

2. Speaking of which, it's obvious the two brothers know Robin from the way they react to him, but they don't bother using his name for one reason: he's the failed vessel of Grima. He had forsaken the cult and gave up the chance to be a god, so he's less than garbage in their eyes.

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